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postville courthouse

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THE COURTHOUSE

New Community: When Russell Post mapped out a new community in 1835, his optimism infected other land speculators who also bought property. Between their holdings and his, Postville was expanded by 1836 to a city of 150 blocks—on paper.

But a depression struck in 1837 and Post was forced to sell most of his property. It was acquired by the firm of Knapp, Bird and Tinsley.

Two years later Logan County was carved out of Sangamon County and the state legislature adopted a circuit court system. Seth M. Tinsley, one of the three new developers, offered to construct a courthouse in Postville at no cost to the newly-created county. His inducement was a deciding factor in Postville's selection as county seat by one vote over Mt. Pulaski.

Construction: Tinsley supervised construction of the building which cost him and his partners \$1,176.83. It was a two-story structure measuring 38 feet by 28 feet, with a stone foundation, oak beams, walnut siding and contained county offices as well as court facilities. Adjacent to it, the county later built a two-story, 12-foot square log jail paneled inside with oak planks two inches thick.

During construction of the courthouse, court sessions were held in the dining room at Dr. John Deskins' Tavern across the street.

Holidays: The building functioned as a civic center meeting hall, site for public gatherings and even as a church, but the high points of its calendar always were the semi-annual "Court Weeks," which were something of a general holiday. As one western traveler wrote: "Not only suitors, jurors and witnesses, but all who can spare the time, brush up their coats and brush down their horses to go to court."

County Seat Moved: The seat of county government was shifted to Mt. Pulaski in 1847 for much the same reason it originally was established at Postville—Mt. Pulaski officials erected a fine new two-story courthouse, which is also a state memorial.

In 1853 the county government was moved again, this time to Lincoln, where it remains today.

The final chapter on Postville and its courthouse was written in 1865 when the thriving, growing city of Lincoln reached out, surrounded and finally absorbed Postville completely within its municipal boundaries.

THE CIRCUIT COURT SYSTEM

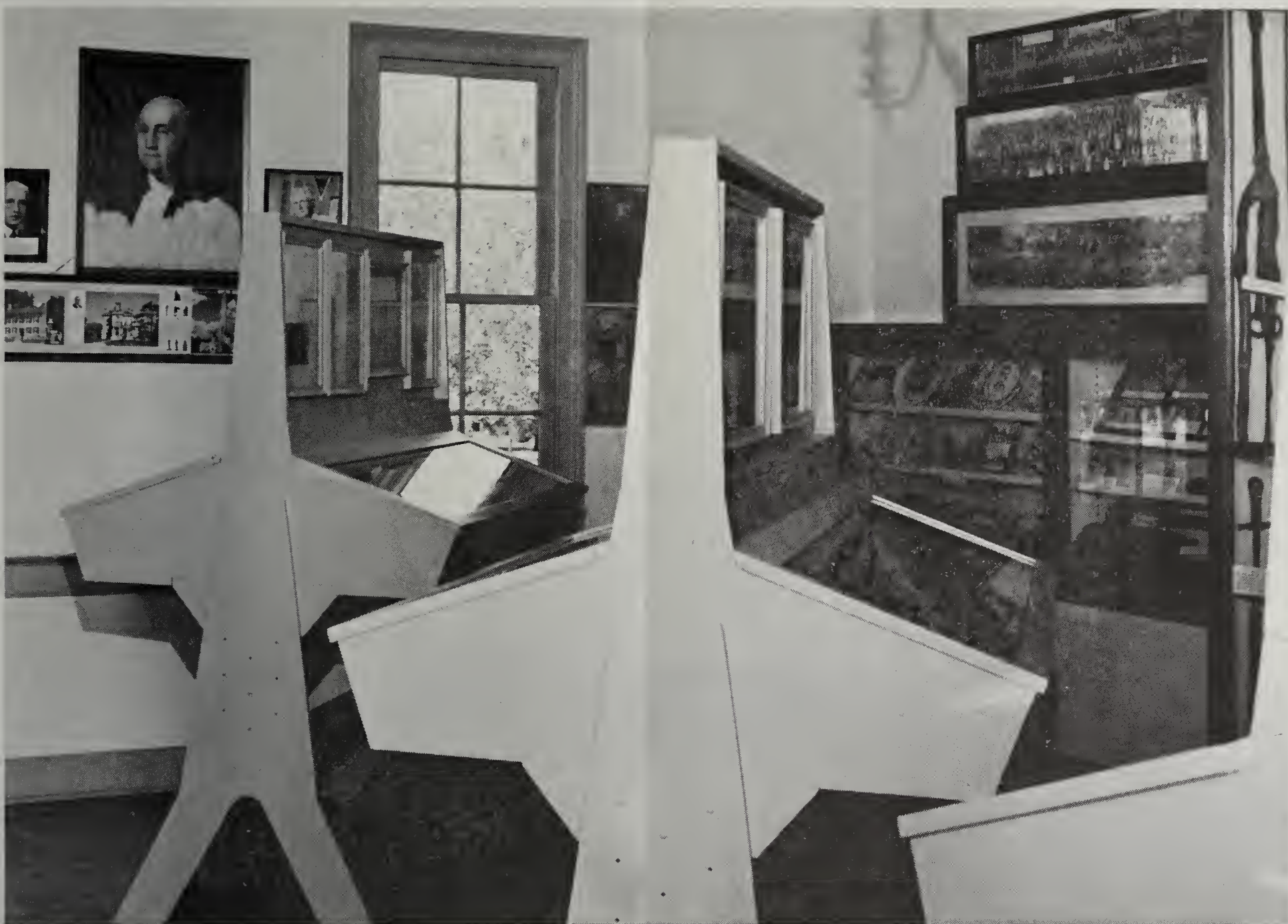
Illinois' circuit court system, adopted in 1839, was patterned after that of Kentucky. The state was divided into multi-county circuits, each with



a judge who traveled from county to county within his jurisdiction until he completed the judicial business of each county. Court sessions sometimes lasted as long as six weeks at a county seat.

Following the same route were groups of traveling lawyers who met with their clients on courthouse lawns, under nearby trees or on the public streets. At night they gathered convivially in village inns. Some of these men had been well educated in the east, while others, like Lincoln, had little formal training. "Circuit-riding" provided a real test of an attorney's legal skill and wisdom. Attorneys of Lincoln's day served a





thinly scattered population and had to ride the circuit in order to make a living.

Eighth Judicial Circuit: It was a hard life with small fees, pioneer living conditions and extensive, difficult travel. The Eighth Judicial Circuit, for example, was very large, at one time encompassing 11,000 square miles, slightly larger than the state of Maryland.

There were periodic alterations, but none of these appreciably reduced the circuit's size during the time Lincoln followed the route regularly.

Lincoln labored on the Eighth Circuit full time for a dozen years and on a part time basis for several more, but he seemed to thrive in that environment. His famous story telling sessions, the close friendships he formed and the political contacts he made in those years apparently compensated him for the weary hours of travel, the poor food and inferior lodging. Except for the two years he served in Congress, he devoted at least half of each year to circuit traveling until he became President.

LINCOLN AT POSTVILLE

A fire in 1857 destroyed Logan County's records. Consequently, little is known about the cases handled by Lincoln at Postville.

One of few accounts of his Logan County activities came from the late Judge Lawrence B. Stringer of Lincoln. He told of Lincoln's involvement in litigation which developed around the sale of Postville's courthouse grounds after the county seat was switched to Mt. Pulaski.

Judge Stringer pointed out that although Knapp, Bird and Tinsley had lured the county seat to Postville with a promise to erect a courthouse and to deed both the building and its site to the county without reservation or conditions, they sued for damages nonetheless when county officials sold the property.

According to the story told by Judge Stringer, Lincoln appeared on behalf of the county board of supervisors to defend their sale of the courthouse and its grounds to private interests. Two

of his law partners, Stuart and Logan, and a son of Governor Ninian Edwards represented the proprietors. The case was tried before Judge David Davis at Mt. Pulaski in August, 1849.

“Mr. Lincoln contended that the agreement was ‘against public policy and founded on corruption,’ and that, in deeding the land without reservations, the proprietors took their chances on the people changing the county seat,” Judge Stringer reported. Lincoln’s arguments were upheld by both the Circuit and U.S. Supreme Courts in what has been regarded since as a landmark decision.

REPRODUCTION

The present structure is a reproduction. The original was purchased by Henry Ford in 1929 and moved to his Greenfield Village at Dearborn, Michigan, despite protests by some of Logan County’s leading citizens. It still stands at Dearborn facing the village green, adjacent to the Thomas Edison laboratories.

At the time it was bought, the courthouse was occupied rent-free by a poor family. During the two previous decades, its owner, T. T. Beach, had attempted unsuccessfully to donate the building and grounds to Logan County with the condition that the board of supervisors would maintain them. The site was used as a playground for many years after removal of the building.

The 1.14-acre square block site was given to the state as a memorial by Logan County Historical Society in 1953. Reconstruction of the building began immediately with plans drawn from the original structure at Greenfield Village.

The state first erected the courthouse’s exterior in conjunction with the centennial celebration in Lincoln. Then, late in 1955, a contract was let for reconstruction of the interior-plastering, painting and installation of a heating plant and public toilets in the basement.

Court furnishings are authentic period pieces which give the historic old room its original appearance. Among the building’s exhibits are several dealing with early Illinois judicial practices.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION . . .

Nearby Lincoln points of interest are the Lincoln Home, the Old State Capitol and the Lincoln Tomb, all in Springfield. Other state parks and memorials involving Lincoln include Lincoln Log Cabin, Lincoln Salt Creek, Lincoln Trail, Lincoln Trail Homestead, Lincoln’s New Salem, Lincoln Monument, Lincoln Trail Monument, Mt. Pulaski Courthouse, Metamora Courthouse and Vandalia Statehouse.

For further information concerning Illinois State Parks and Memorials write to the Department of Conservation, Division of Education, State Office Building, Springfield, 62706.

